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CHILDREN," Miss Wicker commanded, "tell the detective where you hid the cyanide."

But Ronnie and Gertrude simply smiled up at me and said nothing.

I held one of the sodium cyanide pellets between thumb and forefinger. It was cloudy white in color and approximately one and one quarter inches in diameter. "They all look like this, children, but they aren't candy. They definitely are not candy and they are not meant to be eaten."

"Ronnie and Gertrude are wretched, evil children," Miss Wicker declared firmly.

Their mother, Mrs. Randall flushed, but she said nothing.

Originally there had been nine of the pellets. We had recovered four from the grounds outside and another concealed in a toy train in this room. But four of the pellets still remained unaccounted for.

"Are you really a detective?" Ronnie asked. He was seven and younger than his sister.

"Yes. Now Ronnie, where have you children hidden the poison?"

"Where's your partner?"

"I don't have a partner."

"Why not?"

"I'm a detective-lieutenant. Detective-lieutenants don't have partners."

"Why not?"

PLAY



I had the impulse to strangle.
"Because they're mean and nobody
will work with them."

We were in the children's playroom. It was by far the gloomiest

You may take your pick of villains in this tempestuous epic—either two children or nine pellets of deadly sodium cyanide. I have made my choice and will stick to it. For cyanide, to my way of thinking, is more ingratiating than children because it's quicker.



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and most remote room in the large Victorian house.

I turned to their mother. "Can't you do anything about them?"

Mrs. Randall was a pale frightened woman. "I'm sure they'll tell

a roof over your heads. You ought to be grateful."

"The bread is moldy," Ronnie said. "And sometimes the water has salt in it."

My men were outside searching the grounds again. They had been through the house too, but without success.

I forced a smile. "Come now, children, we've been at this for over two hours."

"What are they good for?" Ronnie asked.

A GAME OF CYANIDE

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you in time, Lieutenant. But now they're in one of their stubborn spells and nobody can get them to do anything."

"Bad blood," Miss Wicker said. "Their father was a salesman."

Gertrude was almost nine. The pilot light of mischief danced in her blue eyes. "We live on bread and water."

Miss Wicker glared at her. "I provide you and your mother with

by Jack Ritchie

"For cleaning jewelry. Seems odd that cyanide should be used for that, but it's a fact."

"We don't have jewelry," Bertrude said. "But Aunt Agnes has."

Miss Wicker's eyes narrowed. "Have you been prying again?"

I realized now that I had made a tactical error, but I hadn't wanted to alarm the household unless it was absolutely necessary. I had ordered the grounds searched first and the children had evidently watched from the windows and decided that we were playing a delightful new game.

My smile was beginning to pain me. "That was really very clever of you children to hide a pellet in the toy train. Which one of you did that?"

"You'll never find out," Ronnie said smugly. "We wiped off the fingerprints."

I sighed. "I think the time has come for a good all-around spanking."

Miss Wicker heartily agreed, but an uncharacteristic firmness came into Mrs. Randall's face. "No," she said. "You will not touch the children."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "We'll have to search them."

Ronnie broke into a grin. "I'm clean."

Why didn't Ronnie's mother give him a haircut, I wondered ir-

itably. He looked as though he were wearing a combed helmet.

"I'll wait until a policewoman comes," Gertrude said demurely.

She was blonde and tricky-smiled and would undoubtedly cause a great deal of trouble during the course of her life.

"I will search Ronnie," I said. "And your mother will search you."

We found nothing.

"Why don't you search Aunt Agnes?" Ronnie asked.

Miss Wicker bristled. "I do not have the pellets."

"I wouldn't trust nobody if I was a good detective," Ronnie said.

I had the temptation to give the boy a haircut myself. I studied the grin on his face and a thought descended. Little boys simply do not keep their hair combed. Not for two hours at a stretch.

"Ronnie," I said firmly. "Come here!" And when he hesitated, I added. "Right this minute! And bring your head."

I found another one of the pellets.

The little fiend had scotch-taped it to his skull and combed his hair over it.

I forced myself to beam. "That was very ingenious of you, Ronnie. Now tell Uncle James where the other three pellets are."

"You're not my uncle."

I approached the problem from a tangent. "How would you two like some ice cream?"

A conference of glances united them. They would love it.

"Fine. And I'll see that you get all the ice cream you can eat just as soon as you tell me where the rest of the cyanide is."

They rejected the offer.

"I'll give you a dollar each," I said desperately.

Ronnie was not swayed. "We're holding out for a million dollars."

"I'll make it two dollars each. That's almost a million."

"No, it isn't. I can count up to a hundred and I know."

I found myself pacing the floor. The grounds surrounding the house were extensive. We knew that the pellets had been thrown over the well near the gatehouse, but the children had been playing in that area when we arrived. Now the poison could be anywhere and it might take weeks before we found it all.

"Are you positive there were nine pellets?" Miss Wicker asked.

"Absolutely."

Miss Wicker thought and frowned. "Why would anyone want to steal them?"

"The thief didn't know what he was stealing. He just emptied the jeweler's safe and put everything

in a bag. Later when he parked at the curb outside your grounds to examine his loot, he discovered the pellets. In a fit of exasperation, he threw them over your wall."

Mrs. Randall was shocked. "On these grounds? What a horrible man."

"He didn't know what they were. When we caught him, he still had everything from the safe but the pellets. But he did remember where he had thrown them."

Gertrude looked up at me. "Would you read us a story, Uncle James?"

"I am *not* your Uncle James," I snapped. But then I caught myself and smiled. "What would you like me to read?"

The children came to an agreement on *Lennie, The Giraffe with the Short Neck*. Mercifully, it was short.

I closed the book. "And now, children, where are those cyanide pellets?"

Ronnie blinked. "We didn't promise anything."

I had always regarded the Children's Crusade as a great tragedy. I was not quite so certain now. "Children, do you know what a tacit agreement is?"

They didn't.

"A tacit agreement is one in which two parties agree upon something without actually put-

ting it into words or writing it down. Now why do you think I read that revol—that story to you?"

Ronnie grinned. "You thought that we'd tell you where the poison is."

I nodded. "Now would I have read the story if I hadn't expected you to do just that?"

"I guess not."

"But you let me read it anyway, didn't you? You didn't stop me?"

He admitted the fact.

"So, in effect, because you let me read the story we entered into a mutual agreement—a tacit agreement—that you would tell me where the pellets are. Now wouldn't your conscience bother you if you didn't tell me?"

"No."

"Ronnie," his mother said. "I don't think you're being nice. You really ought to tell Uncle James where they are."

Ronnie didn't agree.

"Just one?" Mrs. Randall coaxed. "Just where one itsy bitsy pellet is. That won't hurt you, now will it?"

The children had a whispered consultation and then Ronnie came forward. "All right. Just one. I threw it on the roof. Maybe it's in the rain gutter."

I went outside where Sergeant Davies was supervising the search.

He scratched his head. "We haven't turned up any more."

"Have you ever thought of looking up?"

"Up?"

"Yes," I snapped. "On the roof. In the rain gutters. Check the chimney, too."

His head must have itched again. "I never thought of that."

"Of course not," I said irritably. "You're just an adult."

I went back into the house and rubbed my hands. "Well, children, shall I read you another story?"

"No," Ronnie said definitely. "We don't want no more tacit agreements."

"It's time for your nap now," Mrs. Randall said.

I glared at her. "Nobody closes an eye until I find the rest of that cyanide."

But Mrs. Randall was uncompromising. "The children are tired. They will have their nap."

Miss Wicker left the room, but I stayed. I found an adult chair and sat down.

Mrs. Randall opened a sofa-bed and the children lay down. She read them a story—*Stanley, the Station Wagon*—and then adjusted the Venetian blinds.

She tip-toed across the room and sat down beside me. "Aren't they sweet?"

Sergeant Davies came into the

room. He saw the children drifting off to sleep and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I found another pellet. It was in the rain gutter."

"Well, good for you. Did you search the chimney, too?"

"Do I have to?"

"Get back up there."

"I'll get my suit all dirty."

"Davies," I said patiently. "After all, you *are* a sergeant. You outrank everybody out there."

He brightened. "That's right. I'll send Travers down the chimney."

When he was gone, I turned to Mrs. Randall. "Your husband . . . ?"

"He died two years ago." Mrs. Randall sighed. "He left no money and so we came to my aunt's place to live."

I thought about Miss Wicker and the general atmosphere of this place. "There was no place else to go?"

"No. Aunt Agnes is the only relative I have. And then, too, she's alone in the world and I thought . . ." She hesitated. "Well, I thought about going to work first and then I decided against it. I think a mother should be with her children, no matter how difficult things might get."

It was quiet in the room and after awhile I nodded myself.

"Pellet."

I sat up. "Did you just hear somebody say, 'pellet?'"

"That was Ronnie. We had cottage cheese and chives for lunch. He always talks in his sleep when he has that."

I left my chair and went to the sofa-bed. Ronnie's eyes were closed and he breathed gently.

"Don't wake him up," Mrs. Randall whispered.

"That was the last thing I had in mind." I sat down beside Ronnie and waited. He said nothing more.

I prompted him softly. "You were talking about a pellet, Ronnie."

But Ronnie slept. Evidently he hadn't eaten enough cottage cheese and chives to speak further.

"Ronnie," I whispered, "when you wake you will tell me where the pellets are. Do you understand? When you wake you will tell me where the pellets are. When you—"

"What in heaven's name are you doing now?" Mrs. Randall demanded.

"I'm trying post-hypnotic suggestion." I leaned closer to Ronnie. "When you wake you will—"

"Stop that!" Mrs. Randall commanded. "I will not have you tampering with Ronnie's little mind!"

I sighed and got off my knees.

Perhaps it wouldn't have worked anyway.

After a half an hour the children began stirring.

"Children," I said sternly. "I've had enough of this."

"First let them have their graham crackers and milk," Mrs. Randall said. "Would you like some milk too, Lieutenant?"

I wasn't thinking about milk when I said, "About three fingers."

I waited impatiently while the children indulged in their food orgy.

Those two remaining pellets had to be somewhere. The grounds had been searched. The house had been searched. The children had been searched. I was even willing to search myself if that would do any . . .

The thought which struck me was frightening.

Mrs. Randall was alarmed. "Are you ill, Lieutenant?"

Certainly I was perspiring. Those little monsters couldn't have had the gall, the unmitigated nerve, the satanic imagination to—

But they had.

I found another pellet.

It was in the cuff of my trousers.

I recovered from that slowly. At least now only one pellet remained to be found. I thought I might attack the problem by the process of canny elimination.

I smiled. "Children, your little game is over. I know where that last pellet is."

They were dubious.

"Yes, sir," I said, almost bubbling. "It's outside on the grounds."

Ronnie laughed with the delight of superior knowledge. "Oh, no it isn't. It's in the house."

Gertrude favored him with a fierce frown.

I had out-witted the little imp. "A slip of the tongue," I said quickly. "I really meant to say that I know the pellet is inside the house and it's—" I divided the house into two sections. "It's on this floor."

But they weren't taken in this time. Their silence was infuriating.

Mrs. Randall smiled. "They're such intelligent children."

I glared at her. "Whose side are you on?"

"The law's, of course," she said hastily. "But can't we be sportsmen?"

Anyway, I had established the fact that the last pellet was in the house. I would have to call the search detail back inside and have it go over the building again.

Gertrude seemed to read my mind. "You'll never find it."

I had that feeling too.

"Let's march," Ronnie said.

I looked at Mrs. Randall.

"Sometimes I play the piano," she explained. "And the children march around in a circle. They wear paper hats and blow horns and beat drums."

I dug into the reservoir of my courage. "I'll join them."

The children regarded me with justified suspicion.

Frankly, I had hoped to lure them into another tacit agreement, but I could see that such a thing wouldn't work this time. On the other hand, I had just committed myself and possibly the children might be antagonized if I backed out now. I created a smile. "This is on the house. I've always wanted to go around in circles."

"We'll have to close the door and put a carpet against the bottom of the door," Gertrude said. "Aunt Agnes doesn't like us to make noise. We plug the keyhole, too."

When that was done, Mrs. Randall played the upright piano. The children and I marched. Really a stupid business.

The door opened and Sergeant Davies almost tripped over the carpet. He froze in his tracks when he saw me.

I stopped blowing my horn and put it behind my back. "Well? What the devil do you want?"

He swallowed. "Travers didn't find anything in the chimney."

"Of course not," I snapped. "The last pellet is somewhere inside the house."

"The last pellet? Then you found another one of them? Where was it?"

I flushed. "Never mind that."

"I'll bring the boys in here," Davies said eagerly, "and we'll really tear the place apart this time."

"No," I said. "I'm taking care of this myself." I was not in the best of temper. "Why are you standing there like that and gawking? Get back outside and search!"

"But you just said the pellet's in the house."

"I don't care what I said. Get out!" Another thought touched my mind. "Davies!"

He had been almost out the door, but he stopped.

"Davies, if you breathe one word . . ."

He shook his head almost sorrowfully. "I won't tell a soul what I just seen. They wouldn't believe me anyway."

When he was gone, we readjusted the carpet at the door and resumed marching.

After awhile Mrs. Randall stopped playing. "I think that's enough for today, children. The Lieutenant is winded."

I sat down gratefully and pondered my next move.

The scream that floated down

upon us pierced through our sound-insulated room.

Mrs. Randall's hand went to her mouth. "That's Aunt Agnes. I'm sure she must be in her room. It's the first one at the head of the stairs."

I pulled open the door and dashed up to the second floor.

Miss Wicker lay gasping on the thick rug, her eyes wide with fright and pain and coming death.

I kneeled over her for a moment and then went to the phone. I dialed for an ambulance, but Miss Wicker was dead before I completed the call.

I put down the phone and looked down at her. A tea cup lay just beyond the tips of her fingers.

My eyes went to the side table — to the silver tea service, to the

thin slices of lemon on a saucer, and to the sugar bowl.

The sugar bowl.

Mrs. Randall and her two children stood in the doorway.

Gertrude looked up at her mother. "Now we won't have to put the rug in front of the door any more, will we, Mommy?"

We had been looking for a pellet. But it wasn't a pellet any more.

Someone had crushed it into a powder and . . .

Gertrude?

Or was it Ronnie?

He had a peculiar little smile on his face.

Or Mrs. Randall?

There was something about her eyes. . . .

Or all three of them?

I had the tired feeling that I would never know.



And now that you have finished reading Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, how did you like it? I should also be very interested to receive your reaction to the stories in it. Write to me at 2441 Beach Court, Palm Beach Shores, Riviera Beach, Florida.

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